

Canadians showed climate needs to be high on agenda

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Body

If there's one issue that broke through the potshots and personal scandals that roiled the surface of this federal election campaign, it might be the pressing threat of climate change and what to do about it.

That's how Catherine Abreu sees it, anyway. The executive director of Climate Action Network Canada closely followed the rise of climate change and the environment as an election priority in the polls. It is now seen to accompany health and affordability as the top concerns for voters across Canada who elected a new parliament on Monday.

As early results trickled in Monday night, the Liberals and Conservatives were competing for the most seats as several close races played out across the country.

But regardless of who takes power, the next government will be pushed by other parties, as the Liberals, Greens and NDP promised to crank up the federal government's climate measures in the next parliament, said Dan Woynillowicz, policy director at Clean Energy Canada.

"What's clear coming out of this election is that being able to successfully secure the support of Canadians in a majority government is contingent on having a serious climate change plan," said Woynillowicz.

For months before the campaign, the main parties - especially on the left - jockeyed for climate credibility, spurred on by the United Nations' climate panel's dire warnings that the window to prevent catastrophe is closing fast.

In May, the Greens called for an all-party "inner cabinet" - styled after the Second World War governments in Canada and the United Kingdom - to confront a threat "as dire as the loss of civilization."

Releasing its 20-point climate plan, the party vowed to double Canada's emissions target for 2030 to 60 per cent below 2005 levels, pledging to transform Canada's economy by banning all new fossil fuel development and halting all oil and gas imports, building a green energy corridor across the country, and retrofitting all buildings in the country over the next decade.

Two weeks later, the NDP trumpeted their own plan at a rally in Montreal. The party vowed to spend \$15 billion in a first mandate, with the bulk of the money earmarked for an expansion of clean public transit and a "climate bank" to fund low-carbon developments.

The NDP also repeatedly vowed to scrap subsidies to fossil fuel companies - a report from Environmental Defence says provincial and federal supports were worth more than \$3.3 billion in 2015 - as the party accused the Liberals of cowing to the interests of large corporations.

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The Conservatives, long seen as laggards on climate action, released their own environment plan they said would give Canada its "best chance" of achieving its current emissions target for 2030 - though experts like Simon Fraser University's Mark Jaccard said the plan would lead to higher emissions, mainly because the Conservatives have promised to remove the federal minimum carbon price and roll back the incoming clean fuel standards drafted when the Liberals were in power.

Once the campaign started, the Liberals had little choice but to promise stronger action on climate change, Abreu said.

In mid-September, climate activists around the world marked off an entire week to raise awareness and concern about global warming. There was a "perfect storm" of factors that amplified the climate cause, including the sight of massive crowds marching in cities across the country, demanding stronger action, Abreu said.

"That's the story of the Canadian election, and I think the reason that's happened is that voters have been so determined to keep it on the agenda," she said. "It is that one policy issue that has penetrated the noise."

For Woynillowicz, the ultimate dream would be for climate change to transcend politics and be seen as the objective threat that scientists project it to be.

"Hopefully," he said, "this will be the last election where whether to go forward or backward on climate change is a significant issue."

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